Why did socialism fail to solve the women's question? – Akif Akalın

https://toplumcutip.blogspot.com/2026/07/sosyalizm-kadn-sorununu-neden-cozemedi.html

A 1931 Soviet poster reads, "Down With Kitchen Slavery! Give Me A New Life!" The poster was offered for sale last year on November 2nd at Hammersite Auction House in Tel Aviv, Israel, with a starting bid of $1,000 and an estimated price of $4,600–$5,400. So, what did this poster depict?

DOWN WITH KITCHEN SLAVERY!

The renowned Soviet painter Grigory Mikhailovich Shegal (1889–1956), the poster depicted the role of women in social life and their liberation from "household chores." The poster visually summarized the Soviet ideology of the 1920s regarding women's rights, industrialization, and the restructuring of social life.

The 1920s in the Soviet Union were the years when the demand for a radical transformation of daily life was voiced most loudly. Women were to be freed from the housework that occupied the majority of daily life and to dedicate their energy to building a bright future and a new way of life.

The poster depicted an "enslaved" housewife of the past washing clothes in a narrow, dark kitchen, while the modern working woman opened a door to a vision of a socialist future: a bright factory with a communal kitchen, cafeteria, nursery, and club (cultural center).

The spiderweb and dim colors in the upper right corner of the poster symbolized the old and regressive domestic order. The working woman in revolutionary red and a headscarf held up a window from the kitchen slavery to a brighter world, in front of a woman who washes clothes, cooks, and is crushed under the weight of housework, her back turned, having lost her individuality.

In this "new way of life," the state would take over household chores such as cooking, washing clothes and dishes, and cleaning, as well as childcare, elderly care, and care for the disabled—tasks traditionally imposed on women by millennia-old class society—by socializing them, while women, like men, would be able to participate in public and social life.

THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IN MARXISM

From their earliest writings, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the founders of Marxist theory, analyzed the oppression of women in society. In *the Communist Manifesto , written in 1848* , they stated that the ruling classes oppressed women, relegating them to second-class citizens in society.

"*The bourgeois sees his wife as a mere means of production…it never even crosses his mind that the main goal [by the communists] is to eliminate women as mere means of production*."

Marxist ideology attributed the source of women's oppression to the role imposed on them within the family in class societies. In Russia, Bolshevik leaders were also aware that women's roles within the family were a direct source of their oppression. Therefore, relieving women of the burden of housework was of paramount importance to the revolutionary government.

Following Engels (*On the Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) on the woman question, Lenin viewed housework as one of the fundamental causes of women's oppression, characterizing it as " *petty-bourgeois domestic servitude* ":

"*Household work is, in most cases, the most unproductive, barbaric, and arduous task a woman can undertake. It is utterly insignificant and contributes nothing to a woman's development*."

The socialization of housework was essential for the true liberation of women:

"*Even if all emancipatory laws were passed, women would remain slaves in the home. Because petty housework oppresses, suffocates, dumbs down, and degrades women, chaining them to the kitchen and the nursery. Their labor is spent on barbarically unproductive, petty, irritating, dumbing down, and oppressive drudgery*."

Drawing a parallel between the liberation of women from housework and communism, Lenin says:

"*The liberation of women and the rise of communism will begin when the proletariat, using state power, launches an all-out struggle against this small-scale household economy and transforms it into a large-scale socialist economy*."

THE SOVIET SOLUTION TO THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

These problems were undoubtedly also the problems of women living in capitalist countries. However, capitalism proposed solving these problems not by "socializing" housework, but by "commercializing" it. Was housework taking up too much of a woman's time? Then a dishwasher, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, and programmable oven should be produced for every woman. Of course, operating these would still require "women's hands," but with a little patience, perhaps one day robots would take over that task as well.

Why couldn't the solution to the sanitation problem be "cleaning companies"? Although women also worked in these companies, at least they received payment for their labor. Furthermore, capitalism offered cheap, low-quality, public nurseries, kindergartens, and daycare centers for the poor, and expensive, high-quality, private nurseries, kindergartens, and daycare centers for the wealthy. The fact that the vast majority of those working in these institutions were women wasn't considered a problem either.

However, according to Lenin, the solution to the women's question lay in socializing housework, in other words, transforming it into public services. The means of socialization would be public dining halls (factory and neighborhood kitchens, canteens), laundries, nurseries and kindergartens, and other collective services that everyone could use free of charge or at symbolic fees. These ideas of

Lenin formed the basis of the government's women's policies in the early years of the Soviet revolution.

Ultimately, the Soviet authorities faced a dual task regarding the women's question:

1. *Abolishing old laws that placed women in an unequal position compared to men.*

In Russia, old laws that treated women as second-class citizens (divorce laws, laws concerning children born out of wedlock, and laws regarding a woman's right to summon the child's father to court for alimony, etc.) were abolished in one fell swoop, and women and men were made equal.

Yet, despite women's years of struggle, most of these achievements had not been realized in any capitalist country. This is because wherever capitalism existed, where private ownership of land and factories persisted, and where the power of capital was maintained, men preserved their privileges.

Of course, all democratic capitalist republics proclaim gender equality, but inequality and humiliation of women continued in civil codes and laws relating to women's rights, particularly concerning their position within the family and divorce proceedings.

2. *The socialization of housework, which led to the enslavement of women.*

According to Lenin, even if women had all rights, they were still effectively enslaved because housework was left to them. He argued that the construction of socialism could only begin when women achieved full equality and embarked on new work together, freed from "those small, dull, unproductive tasks." Lenin cited canteens and nurseries as exemplary institutions that would liberate women from housework.

STEPS TOWARDS WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE SOVIET UNION

The right of women to vote, to work without their husband's permission, to hold positions in state institutions, the right to divorce at the request of "one" partner, the principle of equal pay for equal work, four months of paid maternity leave before and after childbirth, and state-funded childcare were among the first gains. By 1920, abortion was considered merely a medical matter, and women

had gained the right to free abortions in state hospitals. The revolution had abolished all the laws remaining from Tsarist Russia that criminalized homosexuality and regulated sexuality.

In the early years of the revolution, communal kitchens, factory kitchens, public dining halls (neighborhood kitchens), laundries, sewing and repair centers were established to alleviate the burden of housework on women and to socialize household chores. Some apartment buildings were deliberately designed without kitchens or laundries. Home communes and shared living spaces were experimented with. Shared kitchens became common in communal apartment buildings (communalka).

A communalka is a type of housing where multiple families live together in a single apartment, sharing common areas such as the kitchen, bathroom, and toilet. Initially, due to housing crises, large apartments belonging to the wealthy were nationalized and divided among multiple families. By the 1930s, a large portion of the population in many major cities lived in communalkas.

In the Soviet Union, in the late 1920s, apartment buildings without kitchens were constructed to encourage collective/communal living and transform traditional family structures. Tasks such as cooking and laundry were performed in collective facilities (common kitchens, dining halls, laundries, nurseries, kindergartens, and meeting rooms).

To address the burden of "childcare," another issue placed upon women, nurseries and kindergartens were established in workplaces and neighborhoods. The state made childcare a social responsibility. Between 1928 and 1932, the number of nurseries increased twentyfold.

"*True communism, in which the complete liberation of women will be achieved, will only occur when a frontal assault against these meaningless household chores begins (led by the proletariat with the power of the state behind it) or when large-scale socialist economic transformation begins… Public meal services, childcare, nurseries. Here we provide examples of this. Here we take simple, everyday measures that can bring about the real liberation of women, reduce and eliminate inequality between them and men in social production and public life, measures that are neither exaggerated, enormous, nor unattainable*."

ZHENOTDEL – WOMEN'S BUREAU OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

In 1919, the Bolsheviks established the Women's Bureau, called Zhenotdel, first under the leadership of Inessa Armand, and after Armand's death in 1920, under the leadership of Alexandra Kollontay. Armand stated, " *It is impossible to abolish exploitation and slavery, to create a new human being, and to build socialism without eliminating the old forms of family, domestic life, education, and child-rearing* ."

Zhenotdel, whose slogan was "agitation by doing" as defined by Kollontay, was responsible for organizing communal kitchens, nurseries, and laundries, which would be the first step in freeing women from the burden of housework. Inspired by Armand's ideas, Zhenotdel agitators organized "delegate assemblies." Women who served on these assemblies were elected from local factories and villages, participated in factory and hospital management, soviet or trade union management, or served as local administrators or judges.

Kollontay emphasized that poverty, long working hours, and family responsibilities prevented Russian women workers and peasants from participating in political activity, concluding that the Bolsheviks needed to develop new methods and make a special effort to involve women workers in their struggle to create a new society.

In Zhenotdel's second year, 853 such conferences of working-class and peasant women had been organized across Russia. By mid-1920, 500,000 women had served as conference delegates. In the early years of the revolution, Zhenotdel organized numerous campaigns, ranging from supporting the Red Army to mobilizing women for literacy, in an effort to include more women.

In the early years of Zhenotdel, programs aimed at socializing cooking and housework were highly successful. However, the reason people abandoned the habit of "cooking and eating at home" was less due to the socialization of food and more to the hardships of the Civil War years. Many people would either eat in communal dining halls or go hungry. As a result, in 1919-1920, ninety percent of the Petrograd population was fed in communal dining halls, and in 1920, forty percent of Moscow housing consisted of communal houses with "communal kitchens."

It was also not easy for Russian women to entrust their children to state-run nurseries. However, "agitation through action" worked, and seeing that children received very good care in state

nurseries, women began sending their children there. At the 9th Party Congress in 1920, the Women's Bureau stated that even in regions where women "feared nurseries as if they were the plague," 38 daycare centers had now been established.

DEMANDS OF NACIYE HANIM OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF TURKEY

Ismail Hakkı, along with Şefik Hüsnü and Ethem Nejat, was one of the founders of the Turkish Workers and Peasants Socialist Party. In 1920, he went to Baku and participated in the founding of the Turkish Communist Party (TKP), becoming a member of its Central Committee. His sister, Naciye Hanım, a teacher, also came to Baku to manage a school that was to be established there.

In 1920, Naciye Hanım, representing the Turkish Communist Party (TKP) as a female delegate at the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East, delivered a speech that included the demands raised by women in Muslim societies in their struggle against oppression:

1) Complete equality of rights,
2) Women should be able to benefit unconditionally from educational and vocational training institutions established for men.
3) Granting equal rights to both parties in marriage, and the unconditional abolition of polygamy.
4) Unconditional recruitment of women into legislative bodies and administrative institutions,
5) Establishment of committees in all cities, towns, and villages to promote women's rights and protection.

From this, we understand that in the 1920s, communists all over the world, including Turkey, viewed the "women's question" as one of the most important elements in building socialism. Naciye Hanım returned to Istanbul in 1921 after her brother was murdered in the Black Sea during the 15-member group.

THINGS ARE NOT GOING AS PLANNED.

Of course, the Soviet government had taken huge strides in resolving the women's question, and Lenin was rightly proud of these steps taken as early as 1919.

"*Let us consider the position of women. In this area, no democratic party in the world, not even in the most advanced bourgeois republic, has done in decades what we have done in our first year in power. We have truly demolished the shameful laws that place women in an unequal position, restrict divorce and surround it with disgusting formalities, deny recognition to children born out of wedlock, make it mandatory to search for their fathers, etc. As a disgrace to the bourgeoisie and capitalism, countless remnants of these laws can be found in all civilized countries. We have a thousand times more right to be proud of what we have done in this area*."

However, in the same speech, Lenin also drew attention to the areas where things were not going well, lamenting that although women in Russia were equal to men before the law, they were not free because of "household chores." For women to be fully liberated and become equal to men, the national economy needed to be socialized and women needed to participate in collective production labor. Only then would women achieve the same status as men.

"*Despite all the laws aimed at liberating women, they remain slaves in the home. Because menial household chores oppress, suffocate, dull, and humiliate them, chaining them to the kitchen and nursery, and forcing them to expend their labor on barbarically unproductive, insignificant, irritating, dulling, and oppressive drudgery. The true liberation of women, true communism, will only begin when a total struggle against these menial household chores begins (under the leadership of the proletariat holding state power), or rather, when this struggle is transformed into a total socialist economy."*

In theory, every Communist considers this question indisputable, but in practice, do we pay enough attention to it? Of course not. Do we give due attention to the sprouts of communism that already exist in this area? The answer is again no. Catering businesses, nurseries, kindergartens—these are examples of these sprouts, simple, everyday tools that can truly liberate women, that can truly reduce and eliminate their inequalities with men in terms of their roles in social production and public life, tools that contain nothing ostentatious, extravagant, or ceremonial. These tools are not new; (like all the material preconditions of socialism) they were created by large-scale capitalism. But under capitalism, firstly, they became rare, and secondly—and this is particularly important—either by for-profit enterprises that embody the worst characteristics of speculation, profit-making, fraud, and deception, or They remained "acrobatic displays of bourgeois philanthropy," which the best workers rightly hated and scorned.

Undoubtedly, the number of these institutions in our country has increased enormously, and their character has begun to change. Certainly, there is far more organizational capacity among working-class and peasant women than we realize; far more people than we know can organize practical work through the cooperation of numerous workers and an even larger number of consumers, without the excessive talk, clamor, squabbles, and chatter about plans, systems, etc., as our big-headed "intellectuals" or half-baked "communists" do. However, we are not nurturing these new sprouts as we should.

Look at the bourgeoisie. How well they promote what they need! Look how millions of copies of their newspapers praise what capitalists see as "exemplary" businesses, and how these "exemplary" bourgeois institutions are turned into objects of national pride! Our press doesn't bother, or almost never bothers, to describe the best food establishments or nurseries, insisting daily that some of them be examples of their kind. They don't give them enough publicity, they don't detail the savings in human labor, the conveniences for the consumer, the product economy, the liberation of women from domestic slavery, the improvements in hygiene conditions that can be achieved through exemplary communist work and spread throughout society, to all working people."

STEPS BACKWARDS ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

Women's policies, a fundamental part of Bolshevik ideology and implemented in their most radical form in the 1920s, could not be sustained, like many other socialist policies in areas such as education or health. The closure of Zhenotdel, the Party's Women's Bureau, in 1930 was a major setback from socialism.

During the same years, pronatalist (birth-promoting) policies came to the forefront in the Soviet Union. Within this framework, abortion was banned again, and divorce became more difficult. From the 1960s onwards, Russia transitioned from "communalka" houses to "Khrushchevka" type individual apartments. Khrushchevka apartments added kitchens, which had been eliminated in communalka buildings. Policies regarding the care of children, the elderly, and the disabled were retained. Thus, Soviet women once again began working both in factories and at home, taking on a "double burden."

In her article in the book "The October Revolution on its 100th Anniversary," published by Yordam Kitap, Professor Gamze Yücesan Özdemir states:

"*With the October Revolution, women were freed from being domestic slaves, unpaid family laborers in agriculture, or second-class workers in factories, and became citizens participating in working life, social and political life,*" she says.

"W*omen's participation in production and social life during the revolutionary process began with their liberation from domestic slavery" and that "under Soviet rule, a struggle was waged to raise their general and vocational education in order to ensure their representation in all professional fields.*"

Indeed, in Russia before the revolution, women, who could not work "without their husbands' permission," mostly worked only at home and in the fields. Female employment in industry was very low. Even in 1922, after the "legal" obstacles to women working had long been removed, Russian women constituted only 22.2% of unionized workers. Despite intensive efforts to recruit women into the party in 1924, the proportion of women among the Bolsheviks was only 8.2%.

The steps taken to emancipate women in the Soviet Union only bore fruit after the 1930s, and women joined the workforce en masse, partly due to the increased need for female labor during the Second Inter-Imperialist World War. By 1970, almost 90 percent of working-age Soviet women were either employed full-time or in education.

However, the communist ideal of socialized housework in the 1920s, apart from childcare, was never fully realized. Most Soviet women never escaped the double yoke (paid work + unpaid housework).

According to Professor Gamze Yücesan Özdemir, "*The practical implications of these efforts (the socialization of housework) were intertwined with the unique characteristics and challenges of carrying out a revolution in a rural society. In this sense, the efforts to put the radical and transformative breakthroughs of the revolution into practice did not always develop along the intended lines.*"

Frankly, I never considered that the steps taken towards the liberation of women in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries might have been left unfinished due to "material constraints." Because

we know that these policies were developed and successfully implemented during a period in Soviet history characterized by material difficulties.

During the three years following the revolution, the Bolsheviks were forced to use the country's dwindling resources not to build a socialist state, but to win the civil war. Even under these extremely difficult conditions, the workers' and peasants' government established communal restaurants, nurseries, and laundries to ease the burden on housewives, creating opportunities for them to dedicate time to themselves and their work.

In Russia, which was occupied by fourteen counter-revolutionary armies with the direct support of imperialist states immediately after the revolution, can "material impossibility" be an excuse for not continuing what was done in the 1960s?

WE SHOULD START DISCUSSING HOW WE CAN SOCIALIZE HOUSEWORK.

According to Professor Gamze Yücesan Özdemir, "*When considering where, how, and for what reasons women's march towards socialism was interrupted, the specific reasons for the incomplete victory, and their place within the overall balance sheet of socialism's defeat, the historical, social, and structural reasons for the revolution should not be ignored. Within this framework, the lessons left by the revolution, as well as the future horizon it bequeaths to the present day, should be considered important*."

Our professor lists the common criticisms regarding women's issues in the Soviet Union as follows:

1. "Double exploitation": "The legal regulations concerning women and their integration into production have not created the intended effect in terms of women's liberation; on the contrary, they have doubled their burden... The integration of women into production has not been sufficiently combined with solutions developed for women's problems in the home-child-spouse triangle; specifically, the oppressive and possessive characteristics of male dominance in this area have not been eliminated."

2. The exclusion of women from leadership positions and the party's top organs: "The fact that female members are lagging behind in this regard may be a justification. However, it is argued that

parties have not made sufficient efforts to change this situation. Therefore, it is emphasized that the task of governing remains a 'man's job'."

3. Women need to lose their own qualities and become "masculinized" or "genderless" in order to exist in the political and social spheres: "Here, it is stated that a women's revolution should accompany the socialist revolution and the establishment of socialism, but this has not been achieved."

Our professor, who stated that in the socialist and women's struggle, citizenship should include women's collective demands for rights, and that these rights are class-based rights demanded by workers who make the essential contribution to the production and reproduction of life, argues today that the women's struggle should be based on women's equal citizenship with men.

Our professor stated that the October Revolution aimed to dismantle the traditional roles, the classical family, and the chain of values, norms, and relationships that constituted paternalistic oppression—which it saw as the origin of the bourgeois state—and that this demand remains valid today. However, he added, we can only speak of citizenship if women and men have equal rights and collective responsibilities in the production and sharing of life.

Indeed, Russian revolutionaries demonstrated their commitment to the genuine liberation of women, and the steps they took in the 1920s to emancipate women remain the greatest strides toward achieving true equality for women in the millennia since the emergence of class societies. We must continue “where we left off” in the future.

Therefore, communists should discuss the issue of "socializing housework," which we can call indispensable for the liberation of women, not as something to be considered after the revolution, but today, and if possible, take some practical steps in this regard now.

The liberation of women is also a crucial element in creating the "socialist human being," which is one of the most important components of "socialist construction." The following example clearly demonstrates the significant impact the failure to achieve women's liberation in the Soviet Union had on the creation of the socialist human being:

Recently, the journal Europe – Asia Studies published an article by Daria Ukhova titled “A Return to Traditional Family Values? Trends in Gender Ideologies in Russia, 1994 – 2012”.

In her article, Ukhova drew on research from the International Programme for Social Research (ISSP) on Family and Changing Gender Roles to analyze shifts in Russian men's and women's views on the ideal division of labor between caregiving and providing for the family.

A survey conducted “three years” after the lowering of the Soviet Union flag from the Kremlin revealed that, in a country with 70 years of socialist experience, “the majority” of people believed that the “man” should be the primary breadwinner of the household, and that the woman, whether working or not, should take on “household chores.” The idea that “the man should earn the money, the woman should manage the household” was dominant in society.

No one can claim that Soviet women adopted bourgeois ideology within three years.